

# Towards a Biblical View of Environmental Care

We welcome a first contribution from Mr Stephen Bishop

Most ancient cultures have an affinity with the earth. The Andean will tip the remains of their drink, despite the scarcity of it, onto the earth to honour *Pancho Mama* (Mother Earth).<sup>1</sup> The Maoris will bury their afterbirths in the ground in an attempt to become one with the earth again.<sup>2</sup> And Chief Sealth of the Duwamish Indian tribe of Washington State wrote in 1855 to President Franklin Pierce: 'Every part of the earth is sacred to my people. . . . All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth.'<sup>3</sup>

It is only in so-called Christendom that this reverence and respect for the earth has disappeared. In the dominant Western world-view the earth is there to be used, to be stripped of its resources, to be raped and bled dry in an endeavour to achieve the goal of economic growth. We are in danger of sacrificing the earth to the god *Economos*. Christendom has moved away from the quasi-panteism and animism of the so-called 'backward' cultures, and in doing so the earth is no longer the centre of the universe; humankind has taken over – the earth is there only to serve humanity; it is to be vanquished and conquered, as opposed to the biblical view, implicit in Genesis 1:28, of stewarding and caring for the earth (cf Gen. 2:15).

Lynn White, jr., in his famous essay, rightly points out that 'by destroying pagan animism Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects'.<sup>4</sup> However, as others have pointed out,<sup>5</sup> it is not Christianity that is to blame, but Christendom. Biblical Christianity has a lot to say about the care and concern of the earth and its environment. Biblical Christianity is totally opposed to the exploitation of the earth. Christendom, though, in an attempt to denounce paganism, confused the commission to have *dominion* with the concept of *domination*.

In this article I want to show, using the framework of Creation, Fall, Redemption and Consummation, that humanity is linked to the earth; and that Chief Sealth was not too far wide of the mark when he declared that 'Whatever befalls the earth, befalls the children of the earth'.

## Creation

All attempts to construct a biblical environment ethic must begin with Jesus, for he is the source of all things.

Paul in Colossians tells us that 'by him all things were created' . . . and that 'in him all things hold together'. He is not only the *source* but also the *sustainer* of all things. Genesis chapters one and two then tell us how God, through Jesus, created the heavens and the earth. The culmination of that creation was humanity – it was humanity that was made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). Humanity then had the task of continuing the process of filling the earth. All of the earth is the LORD's (Psalms 24:1); but it is to humanity as God's vice-regent to whom it is now entrusted (Psalms 115:16). We now have the responsibility to care for and steward the earth.

It is significant, though, that humanity is not set over and against the earth, rather he is derived from it:

And the LORD God formed man from the *dust* of the *ground* . . . (Gen. 2:7).

Man is of the earth, earthy . . . (I Cor. 15:47).

Humanity then is formed from the earth, and has a divine commission to look after it. Humanity is 'of the earth', part of the created order; the destiny of humanity and the earth are inseparable.

## The Fall

Creation brought order to chaos and it was humanity's task to continue to bring that order into creation by working and caring for it (Gen. 2:15). However in Genesis 3 humanity rebels against God, and brings sin into creation.

God's mandate to humanity – be fruitful, increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it and rule – is made that much more difficult as a result.

Increasing in number is made all the more painful as child-bearing pains are increased. Rulership becomes deformed – 'the husband shall rule over the wife'. Subduing is made all the more difficult because work in the garden will be 'a painful toil'.

Perhaps the most significant thing, though, is that the earth is cursed because of humanity. Humanity's fall has resulted in the earth's fall. Paul describes it as the whole of creation being subjected to frustration.

Where once humanity lived in harmony with earth, they are now opposed. In Genesis 4, Cain murders his brother Abel and as a consequence the ground will no longer yield its crop for him (Gen. 4:10).

Eventually the whole earth became corrupt. It became corrupt because humanity corrupted its ways (Gen. 6:13); the result is the judgment of God, and probably the worst environmental disaster the earth has experienced – the Flood (Gen. 6-7).

God then makes a covenant with the man who has been saved by the grace of God out of the Flood, Noah. This covenant is not restricted to humanity:

I now established my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you . . . *every living creature on earth* (Gen. 9:9f).

Humanity persistently broke covenant with god, and whenever they did it almost always resulted, amongst other things, in environmental disaster: (cf Is. 24 esp. vv 5, 6, Hosea 4:1-3). God

can use environmental disasters as a means of judgment upon humanity. Furthermore, humanity's mismanagement of the land can also lead to judgment – the breaking of the Jubilee is a case in point.

God's concern is establishing Jubilee (Lev. 25) was justice and rest: justice and rest for humanity, the earth and the animals. Jubilee, like the covenant with Noah, is evidence of God's concern not only for humanity but for the animals and the land.

Israel neglected to keep the Jubilee and so incurred the judgment of God – they were carried off into exile and:

The land enjoyed its sabbath rest; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfilment of the word of the Lord (II Chron. 36:21).

Humanity's fall into sinfulness, then, is the cause of the earth's fall into frustration and groaning, which is manifested in environmental and ecological disasters.

To see what hope there is for humanity and the earth we need to look at what Jesus accomplished in redemption.

### Redemption

There has been a tendency among evangelicals to reduce the scope of redemption. The cross reconciles humanity to God – but it does so much more: the cross and salvation have cosmic implications.

God, through Christ, has reconciled *all things* to himself (Col. 1). The Greek *ta panta* (all things) means everything, it is not restricted to humanity, it includes the whole of creation. It was because of God's love for the whole world (not just humanity) that he sent 'his only begotten Son' (Jn. 3:16).

Humanity now has the task of fulfilling the commission given in the pre-Fall garden by taking the finished work of Jesus on the cross and applying it to all of creation. The earth needs to hear the good news of the kingdom; Jesus commands us to 'Go into all the world and preach the good news to all *creation*'.

Jesus didn't limit the good news to humanity, so why should we? It is our task to enable the creation to enjoy the liberty that we now experience in Christ (Rom. 8:21).

It is this task that has been completed in Christ, but it is the church's duty to apply it to creation, and then what has been begun can be consummated at Jesus' return.

### Consummation

All that Jesus achieved on the cross was the beginning of the end. The end will come when he returns again, and there will be a new heaven and a new earth – a new order will be established; 'the old order of things has passed away' (Rev. 21:4).

Redeemed humanity will experience resurrection – we will have a new body – and in the same way the earth will experience

resurrection – it will be renewed (the emphasis of the Greek 'new' is freshness). The frustration manifested in environmental disasters will be a thing of the past – the earth will finally have come into the liberty experienced by the children of God (i.e., resurrection).

The prophet Isaiah caught a glimpse of this new earth (Is. 65:17ff):

*The fall will be undone:*

v23 They will not toil in vain (cf Gen. 3:17) or bear children doomed to destruction (cf Gen. 3:16).

*There will be harmony in the animal kingdom:*

v25 The wolf and the lamb will feed together and the lion will eat straw like the ox.

And there will be environmental harmony – for there will be no curse (Rev. 21:3).

In our brief overview of Creation, Fall, Redemption and Consummation we can see that humanity is inextricably linked to the earth:

- (i) humanity is created from the earth;
- (ii) humanity is to keep and till the earth;
- (iii) humanity's fall results in the earth's fall;
- (iv) humanity is to preach the gospel to the earth; and
- (v) humanity's manifestation as the children of God results in the earth's liberation.

So then as children of God we have a responsibility to look after the earth to enable it to experience the kingdom of God, and so hasten the coming of the Lord. As a Christian Chief Sealth might say: 'Whatever befalls the sons of the earth, befalls the earth'.

### References

- 1 'Our Earth, Our Home', in *New Internationalist* No. 177, Nov. 1987, p.4
- 2 Jonathan Porritt, *Seeing Green* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), p.202
- 3 Quoted in Anne H. Ehrlich and Paul R. Ehrlich, *Earth* (London: Methuen/Thames, 1987), p.161
- 4 Lynn White, jun., 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis' in *Science*, vol. 155 (1967), pp.1203-1207
- 5 See, for example, Loren Wilkinson (editor), *Earthkeeping* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), p.104